

Harsha of Kashmir, a Hindu Iconoclast?



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Whenever the history of the many thousands of temple destructions by Muslims is discussed, the secularists invariably come up with the claim that Hindus have done much the same thing to Buddhists, Jains and "animists". In particular, the disappearance of Buddhism from India is frequently explained as the result of "Brahminical onslaught". Though extremely widespread by now, this allegation is very largely untrue.

As for tribal "animists", numerous tribes have been gradually "sanskritized", acculturated into the Hindu mainstream, and this never required any break with their worship of local goddesses or sacred trees, which have found a place in Hinduism, if need be in what Indologists call the "little traditions" flourishing in the penumbra of the "great tradition". The only break sometimes required was in actual customs,

most notably the abjuring of cow-slaughter; but on the whole, there is an unmistakable continuity between Hinduism and the various "animisms" of India's tribes. Hinduism itself is, after all, "animism transformed by metaphysics" (as aptly written in the introduction to the 1901 census report in a discussion of the unfeasibility of separating Hinduism from "animism").

As for conflict with the Jain and Buddhist sects, even what little evidence is cited, turns out to prove a rather different phenomenon on closer inspection. The very few conflicts there were, were generally started by the sectarian Buddhists or Jains. This way, a few possible cases of Shaiva (esp. Virashaiva) intolerance against Jains in South India turn out to be cases of retaliation for Jain acts of intolerance, if the affair was at all historical to begin with. If there was a

brief episode of mutual Shaiva-Jaina persecution, it was at any rate not based on the religious injunctions of either system, and therefore remained an ephemeral and atypical event. Likewise, the well-attested persecution of Brahmins by the Buddhist Kushanas remained exceptional because it had no solid scriptural basis, unlike Islamic iconoclasm and religious persecution, which was firmly rooted in the normative example of the Prophet.

Judging from the evidence shown so far, I maintain that Hindu persecutions of Buddhists have been approximately non-existent. The oft-repeated allegation that Pushyamitra Shunga offered a reward for the heads of Buddhist monks is a miraculous fable modelled on just such an episode in Ashoka's life, with the difference that in Pushyamitra's case, as per the hostile Buddhist account itself (Ashokavadana and

Divyavadana), no actual killing took place, because an Arhat with miraculous powers magically materialized monks' heads with which people could collect the reward all while leaving the real monks in peace. Art historians have found Pushyamitra to have been a generous patron of Buddhist institutions.

Next to the Pushyamitra fable, the most popular "evidence" for Hindu persecutions of Buddhism is a passage in Kalhana's history of Kashmir, the *Rajatarangini* (Taranga 7: 1089 ff.), where king Harsha is accused of looting and desecrating temples. This example is given by JNU emeritus professor of ancient history, Romila Thapar, in Romila Thapar et al.: *Communalism in the Writing of Indian History*, p.15-16, and now again in her letter to Mr. Manish Tayal (UK), 7-2-1999. The latter letter was written in reply to Mr. Tayal's query on Arun

Shourie's revelations on the financial malversations and scholarly manipulations of a group of historians, mainly from JNU and AMU. The letter found its way to internet discussion forums, and I reproduce the relevant part here:

"As regards the distortions of history, Shourie does not have the faintest idea about the technical side of history-writing. His comments on Kosambi, Jha and others are laughable -- as indeed Indian historians are treating him as a joke. Perhaps you should read the articles by H. Mukhia in the Indian Express and S. Subramaniam in India Today. Much of what Shourie writes can only be called garbage since he is quite unaware that history is now a professional discipline and an untrained person like himself, or like the others he quotes, such as S.R. Goel, do not understand how to use historical sources. He writes that I have no

evidence to say that Buddhists were persecuted by the Hindus. Shourie of course does not know Sanskrit nor presumably does S.R. Goel, otherwise they would look up my footnotes and see that I am quoting from the texts of Banabhatta's Harshacharita of the seventh century AD and Kalhana's Rajatarangini of the twelfth century AD. Both texts refer to such persecutions."

Let us take a closer look at this paragraph by the eminent historian.

JNU snobbery

Most space of the para and indeed the whole letter is devoted to attacks ad hominem, much of it against Mr. Sita Ram Goel. In his book Hindu Temples, What Happened to Them, vol.1 (Voice of India, Delhi 1990), Goel has listed nearly two thousand mosques standing on the debris of demolished Hindu temples: nearly two

thousand specific assertions which satisfy Karl Poper's criterion of scientific theories, viz. they should be falsifiable: every secularist historian can go and unearth the story of each or any of the mosques enumerated and prove that it was unrelated with any temple demolition. But until today, not one member of the well-funded brigade of secularist historians has taken the scholarly approach and investigated any of Goel's documented assertions. The general policy is to deny his existence by keeping him unmentioned; most publications on the Ayodhya affair have not even included his book in their bibliographies even though it holds the key to the whole controversy.

But sometimes, the secularists cannot control their anger at Goel for having exposed and refuted their propaganda, and then they do some shouting at him, as done in this case by Romila Thapar. It is not true

that Sita Ram Goel is an "untrained person", as she alleges; he has an MA in History from Delhi University (ca. 1944). And he has actually practised history, writing on Communism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. I never tested Shourie's knowledge of Sanskrit, but as for Goel, he is fluent in Sanskrit, definitely more so than Prof. Thapar herself. Having gone through Urdu-medium schooling and having lived in Calcutta for many years, he is fluent in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, English and Sanskrit, and also reads some Persian, elementary Persian being traditionally included in Urdu-medium education. In Hindu Temples, vol.2, a book of which Goel sent Prof. Thapar a copy, he has discussed the very testimonies she is invoking as proof (esp. in the second edition in which he reproduces Prof. Thapar's reply with his own comment),-- yet

she maintains that he has not bothered to check her sources.

Note, at any rate, Romila Thapar's total reliance on arguments of authority and status. No less than seven times does she denounce Shourie's alleged (and unproven) incompetence: Shourie has "not the faintest idea", is "unaware", "untrained", and "does not know", and what he does is "laughable", "a joke", "garbage". But what exactly is wrong in his writing, we are not allowed to know. If history is now a professional discipline, one couldn't deduce it from this letter of hers, for its line of argument is part snobbish and part medieval (relying on formal authority), but quite bereft of the scientific approach.

Reliance on authority and especially on academic titles is quite common in academic circles, yet it is hardly proof of a scholarly

mentality. Commoners often attach great importance to titles (before I got my Ph.D., I was often embarrassed by organizers of my lectures introducing me as "Dr." or even "Prof." Elst, because they could not imagine an alleged expert doing without such a title), but scholars actively involved in research know from experience that many publications by titled people are useless, while conversely, a good deal of important research is the fruit of the labour of so-called amateurs, or of established scholars accredited in a different field of expertise. Incidentally, Prof. Thapar's pronouncements on medieval history are also examples of such transgression, as her field really is ancient history.

At any rate, knowledge of Sanskrit is not the issue, for the Rajatarangini is available in English translation, as Romila Thapar certainly knows: Rajatarangini. The Saga of

the Kings of Kashmir, translated from Sanskrit by Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, with a foreword by Jawaharlal Nehru, Sahitya Akademi, ca. 1960. With my limited knowledge of Sanskrit, I have laboriously checked the crucial sentences against the Sanskrit text, edited by M.A. Stein: Kalhana's Rajatarangini or Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir (1892), republished by Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi 1960. I could not find fault with the translation, and even if there were imperfections in terms of grammar, style or vocabulary, we can be sure that there are no distortions meant to please the Hindu nationalists, for the translator was an outspoken Nehruvian. If I am not mistaken, he was the husband of Nehru's sister, Vijayalakshmi Pandit.

S. Subramaniam's account

Let us check Prof. Thapar's references, starting with the review article on Shourie's book by S. Subramaniam: "History sheeter. Bullheaded Shourie makes the left-right debate a brawl", India Today, 7-12-1998. This article itself is quite a brawl: "Shourie has nothing to say beyond repeating the Islamophobic tirade of his henchman, the monomaniacal Sita Ram Goel who is referred to repeatedly in the text as 'indefatigable' and even 'intrepid'. Goel's stock in trade has been to reproduce ad nauseam the same extracts from those colonial pillars Elliott and Dowson and that happy neo-colonialist Sir Jadunath Sarkar."

It is, of course, quite untrue that Shourie's book is but a rehashing of earlier work by Goel. As can be verified in the index of Shourie's book, Goel's findings are

discussed in it on p.99-100, p.107-108, and p.253-254; that leaves well over two hundred pages where Shourie does have something to say "beyond repeating the tirade of his henchman". Goel may be many things, but certainly not "monomaniacal". He has written a handful of novels plus essays and studies on Communism, Greek philosophy, several aspects of Christian doctrine and history, secularism, Islam, and of course Hinduism. His writings on Islam are much richer than a mere catalogue of atrocities, and even the catalogue of atrocities is drawn from many more sources than just Elliott and Dowson. I am also not aware that he has repeated certain quotations ad nauseam; to my knowledge, most Elliott & Dowson quotations appear only once in his collected works. Finally, Goel's position is not more "Islamophobic" than the average book on World War 2 is "Naziphobic"; if

certain details about the doctrines studied are repulsive, that may be due to the facts more than to the prejudice of the writer.

So, practically every word in Subramaniam's evaluation is untrue. No wonder, then, that he concludes his evaluation of Shourie's latest as follows: "But serious thought of any variety has been replaced by spleen, hysteria and abuse." That, of course, is rather the case with Shourie's critics, including Subramaniam himself who keeps the readers in the dark about Shourie's arguments as well as about his own rebuttals. If Romila Thapar refers to his review, it can only be for its "treating Shourie like a joke", but by no means for its demonstrating how history has now become a scientific discipline; all it demonstrates is the bullying rhetoric so common in the debate between the scientific and the secularist schools of Indian history. As a reader (one K.R. Panda, Delhi)

commented in the next issue (India Today, 21-12-1998): "The review of Arun Shourie's Eminent Historians ironically hardly mentioned what the book was about. It read more like a biographical sketch of the author with a string of abuses thrown in."

Harbans Mukhia's account

In his guest column "Historical wrongs. The rise of the part-time historian" (Indian Express, 27-11-1998), JNU professor Harbans Mukhia surveys the influence of Marxism in Indian historiography, highlighting the pioneering work of D.D. Kosambi, R.S. Sharma and Irfan Habib in the 1950s and 60s. He argues that this Marxist wave began without state patronage, in an apparent attempt to refute Shourie's account of the role of state patronage and of the resulting corruption in the power position Marxist historians have come to

enjoy. This is of course a straw man: Shourie never denied that Kosambi meant what he wrote rather than being eager to please Marxist patrons. The dominance of Marxist scholarship started with sincere (though by no means impeccable) scholars like Kosambi, followed by a phase where the swelling ranks of committed Marxist academics got a hold on the academic and cultural power positions, and then by a phase where being a Marxist was so profitable that many opportunists whose commitment was much shallower also joined the ranks, and hastened the inevitable process of corruption.

Anyway, the only real argument which Mukhia develops, is this: "To be fair, such few professionals as the BJP has in its camp have seldom leveled these charges at least in public. They leave this task to the likes of Sita Ram Goel who, one learns, does full

time business for profit and part time history for pleasure, and Arun Shourie who, too, one learns, does journalism for a living, specializing in the investigation of non-BJP persons' scandals".

It is not clear where Mukhia has done his "learning", but his information on Goel is incorrect. Goel was a brilliant student of History at Delhi University where he earned his MA. In the period 1949-56 he was indeed a "part-time historian", working for a living as well as doing non-profit research on the contemporary history of Communism in the framework of the Calcutta-based Society for the Defence of Freedom in Asia. He did full-time business for profit between 1963, when he lost his job after publishing a book critical of Nehru, and 1983, when he handed his business over to younger relatives. Ever since, he has been a full-time historian, and some of his publications are

simply the best in their field, standing unchallenged by the historians of Mukhia's school, who have never gotten farther than the kind of invective ad hominem which we find in the above-mentioned texts by Romila Thapar, S. Subramaniam and Mukhia himself.

As for Shourie, Mukhia is hardly revealing a secret with his information that Shourie "does journalism for a living". The greatest investigative journalist in India by far, he has indeed unearthed some dirty secrets of Congressite and casteist politicians. His revelations about the corrupt financial dealings between the Marxist historians and the government-sponsored academic institutions are in that same category: fearless and factual investigative journalism. Shourie has an American Ph.D. degree in Economics, which should attest to a capacity for scholarship, even if not strictly in the

historical field. When he criticizes the gross distortions of history by Mukhia's school, one could say formally that he transgresses the boundaries of his specialism, but such formalistic exclusives only hide the absence of a substantive refutation. Thus far, Shourie's allegations against Harbans Mukhia's circle stand unshaken.

Kalhana's first-hand testimony:

Now, let us look into the historical references cited by Romila Thapar. Of Banabhatta's Harshacharita, concerning Harsha of Kanauj (r.606-647), I have no copy available here, so I will keep that for another paper. Meanwhile, I have been able to consult both the Sanskrit original and the English translation of Kalhana's Rajatarangini, and that source provides a clinching testimony.

Harsha or Harshadeva of Kashmir (r.1089-1111) has been called the "Nero of Kashmir", and this "because of his cruelty" (S.B. Bhattacharjee: Encyclopaedia of Indian Events and Dates, Sterling Publ., Delhi 1995, p.A-20). He is described by Kalhana as having looted and desecrated most Hindu and Buddhist temples in Kashmir, partly through an office which he had created, viz. the "officer for despoiling god-temples". The general data on 11th-century Kashmir already militate against treating him as a typical Hindu king who did on purely Hindu grounds what Muslim kings also did, viz. to destroy the places of worship of rival religions. For, Kashmir had already been occupied by Masud Ghaznavi, son of Mahmud, in 1034, and Turkish troops were a permanent presence as mercenaries to the king.

Harsha was a fellow-traveller: not yet a full convert to Islam (he still ate pork, as per Rajatarangini 7:1149), but quite adapted to the Islamic ways, for "he ever fostered with money the Turks, who were his centurions" (7:1149). There was nothing Hindu about his iconoclasm, which targeted Hindu temples, as if a Muslim king were to demolish mosques rather than temples. All temples in his kingdom except four (enumerated in 7:1096-1098, two of them Buddhist) were damaged. This behaviour was so un-Hindu and so characteristically Islamic that Kalhana reports: "In the village, the town or in Srinagara there was not one temple which was not despoiled by the Turk king Harsha." (7:1095)

So there you have it: "the Turk king Harsha". Far from representing a separate Hindu tradition of iconoclasm, Harsha of Kashmir was a somewhat peculiar (viz.

fellow-traveller) representative of the Islamic tradition of iconoclasm. Like Mahmud Ghaznavi and Aurangzeb, he despoiled and looted Hindu shrines, not non-Hindu ones. Influenced by the Muslims in his employ, he behaved like a Muslim.

And this is said explicitly in the text which Romila Thapar cites as proving the existence of Hindu iconoclasm. If she herself has read it at all, she must be knowing that it doesn't support the claim she is making. Either she has just been bluffing, writing lies about Kalhana's testimony in the hope that her readers would be too inert to check the source. Or she simply hasn't read Kalhana's text in the first place. Either way, she has been caught in the act of making false claims about Kalhana's testimony even while denouncing others for not having checked with Kalhana.

Romila Thapar on Mahmud Ghaznavi

It is not the first and only time that Romila Thapar is caught tampering with the sources. In her article on Somnath and Mahmud Ghaznavi (Frontline, 23-4-1999), she questioned the veracity of Mahmud's reputation as an idol-breaker, claiming that all the references to Mahmud's destruction of the Somnath temple (1026) are non-contemporary as well as distorted by ulterior motives. It's the Ayodhya debate all over again: when evidence was offered of pre-British references to the destruction of a Ram temple on the Babri Masjid site, the pro-Babri Masjid Action Committee historians replied that the evidence was not contemporary enough, but without explaining why so many secondary sources come up with the temple demolition story.

Likewise here: if there was so much myth-making around Ghaznavi's Somnath campaign, even making him the norm of iconoclasm against which the Islamic zeal of every Delhi sultan was measured, what momentous event triggered all this myth-making?

Anyway, in this case the claim that there is no contemporary evidence, is simply false. Though she does mention Ghaznavi's employee Alberuni, she conceals that Alberuni, who had widely travelled in India and was as contemporary to Ghaznavi as can be, has confirmed Ghaznavi's general policy of Islamic iconoclasm and specifically his destruction of the Somnath temple. Alberuni writes (Edward Sechau, tra.: Alberuni's India, London 1910, vol.1, p.117, and vol.2, p.103) that the main idol was broken to pieces, with one piece being thrown into the local hippodrome, another being built into

the steps at the entrance of the mosque of Ghazni, so that worshippers could wipe their feet on it. Mahmud's effort to desecrate the idol by all means shows that his iconoclasm was not just a matter of stealing the temple gold, but was a studied act of religious desecration.

He thereby smashed to pieces yet another pet theory of the Romila Thapar school, viz. that the Islamic iconoclasts' motive was economic rather than religious. It is precisely the primary sources which leave no stone standing of the edifice of Nehruvian history-writing.